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After decades of failed peace negotiations and armed conflict, it appears that Colombia is ready to open a new chapter in its history. Following a year of exploratory talks between guerrilla leaders and government officials in La Havana, Cuba, peace negotiations began in Oslo and La Havana in October 2012. The current harmful stalemate appears to have led to a more serious willingness to reach an agreement than in the past.

Peace in Colombia?

A regional perspective on a regional problem

Colin Walch

Fifty years of armed conflict has left deep wounds, considerable distrust and fear in Colombian society, together with a cultural acceptance of violence. The conflict has also bubbled over, destabilising border regions with refugee fluxes and providing a hub for the drugs trade. Springing from the conflict, intra-state military intimidation occurred between Colombia and Venezuela and to a lesser extent between Colombia and Ecuador. Diplomatic relations were broken off in 2010 after Colombia accused Venezuela of providing a safe haven for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (the FARC guerrilla), decreasing economic exchange between the two countries. The regional negative effects of the armed conflict have embittered the relationship between the neighbouring Andean countries. Even in Central America and Mexico, drugs cartels have been involved in direct contact with the guerrilla and other Colombian illegal armed groups through the drugs trade and arms trafficking.¹

Since the failure of the negotiations between Colombian President Andrés Pastrana and the FARC (1998-2002) and the subsequent election of Alvaro Uribe, the FARC have lost strength and the government's military advantage over the FARC is quite clear. Through the Plan Colombia – a US aid package to help the Colombian government to fight against the drugs trade – the Colombian armed forces have undergone unprecedented reform, especially in the building-up of their intelligence, counter-insurgency tactics and air power. However, this set of reforms has not

been enough to defeat the guerrillas as was expected. The guerrillas (both FARC and the National Liberation Army, ELN) show an incredible capacity to adapt and survive, and are able to take advantage of weakly-controlled borders with Venezuela and Ecuador to rest, equip and trade drugs. In addition, they have adopted more defensive tactics characterised by sabotage attacks, car bombs, improvised explosive devices and landmines.²

At the same time, the guerrillas have lost their urban presence and some of their support from the agrarian rural population due to increased (guerrilla) violence against civilians, and to their involvement in the drugs trade since the 1980s. Given their limited military capacity and isolation in the political and particularly the public sphere, a peace process presents an opportunity for the guerrillas to show their interest in improving the conditions of the marginalised rural population and to clarify their political discourse, perhaps facilitating a smoother transition from armed conflict to politics. The FARC leadership appears to agree that a peaceful settlement of the conflict is preferable to continued fighting. The ELN have also declared their willingness to negotiate, but their participation in the ongoing peace process is still not clear.

In addition to putting constant military pressure on the guerrilla, in June 2011 President Juan Manuel Santos' (2010-) new government adopted an "historic" law (the Victim and Land Restitution Law), which provides for the payment of reparations to over four

million victims of paramilitary violence. The right-wing paramilitary groups have claimed to be acting in opposition to the left-wing guerrillas. The law also provides for giving back land lost during the armed conflict. This smart and progressive move demonstrates that the government is serious about social justice, reconciliation and rural development, which are important issues for which the guerrillas have been fighting. As described by International Crisis Group, "an agreement on rural development, as foreseen in the pre-accord, could be a bridge to legal political participation for the guerrillas".³

An elite with regional ambitions

Although President Santos was seen as the heir to Uribe, the two men come from different elites. Uribe belongs to a regional elite made up of large landowners and regional entrepreneurs. This regional elite had strong links with paramilitary movements in the 1990s, as the guerrillas directly affected their economic interests and very often their physical integrity. In addition, the assassination by the FARC of Uribe's father in the mid-1980s contributed to his hardline stance against the guerrilla. Many people in Uribe's government and close entourage have been condemned for paramilitary ties, and it is not a coincidence that Uribe has had the leverage to convince the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) – the largest far-right paramilitary group in Colombia – to demobilise. More recently, Uribe has been accused of receiving financial support from the AUC for his election

in 2002⁴. That said, Uribe still enjoys great popularity in Colombia and draws many of his followers from the regional agrarian elite, parts of the military and political circles. To a large extent, the secret negotiations in Cuba that ended in the current pre-agreement were a way of preventing spoilers, like Uribe and his followers, from criticising the negotiation process.

President Santos comes from an urban elite with a long standing presence in Colombian politics, where the political interests of the agrarian elite vary. Santos, cosmopolitan and a strong believer in free-market economics, represents the interests of a growing liberal elite that wants to embellish the international image of Colombia in order to draw interest from investors. Most importantly, Santos' government has been working hard to integrate the country more thoroughly into the Latin American regional economy by being more active in various regional organisations, something that Uribe had failed to do, especially with regard to Venezuela, Colombia's second largest economic partner after the US.⁵ Regional trade dynamics were at the root of the Santos administration's willingness to agree to a pre-agreement with the FARC. Indeed, guerrillas and other illegal armed groups acting along the border between Venezuela and Colom-

bia have hindered the development of bilateral trade exchanges between the two countries, due to violence along the border and subsequent heavy security check at border crossings.⁶

Venezuela, Cuba, Chile and Norway have all been involved in attempting to facilitate conflict resolution within this regional context. In addition to its role as the main economic partner of Colombia, Venezuela is a key actor in resolving the armed conflict, due to the activities of the FARC along its vast and porous border with Colombia. Many people have been displaced along the 400 kilometre border with Venezuela. In this "no man's land", paramilitaries, drug cartels and the guerrillas have fought, or sometimes collaborated, to control drug routes to Venezuela, terrorising and controlling local populations. It is estimated that between 120,000 and 200,000⁷ Colombian refugees have moved to the border region in Venezuela due to growing insecurity on the Colombian side, characterised by selective assassinations, kidnappings and extortion.⁸ Similar spillovers are affecting Ecuador and to a lesser extent Peru, Brazil and Panama.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez appears to be a key player in the negotiation process, given that he has privileged contact with the FARC and a good relationship with President San-

tos. The role of Chavez is balanced by the facilitation of the Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, a good friend of Santos, and more politically in line with him. Cuba and Norway are seen by the guerrillas as safe places to negotiate, given that some of their leaders are listed as terrorists and drug traffickers by the US. In addition to having extensive experience in international mediation, Norway has been involved in Colombia for a long time and is a major aid donor to the country. Just recently, the Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff offered her help to Santos for the negotiation process, claiming that the talks between the government of Colombia and the FARC were key to the stability of the region as a whole and especially to the countries that share borders with Colombia.⁹ Although numerous failed peace negotiations have taken place in the past, this type of regional and international involvement in Colombia's peace negotiations is unprecedented.

Failed peace processes in Central America

If the regional perspective is increasing the chances of reaching a peace agreement between the FARC and the government of Colombia, there are a number of challenges remaining. The negotiations need to bring real peace dividends to



Activists from la Defensoría del Pueblo (the public Ombudsman's Office) putting up a banner saying: "Never more. Never more disappearances. Never more silence" at the 10th anniversary of the massacre of Alto Naya in 2001.

local communities that have suffered the majority of the violence in Colombia. One of the principal challenges in the negotiation process will be the issue of a cease-fire. Negotiation within a context of violence is never easy and can provide justification for parties to leave the table. If ongoing armed hostilities between the FARC and the government during the peace process do not decrease, local communities may begin to doubt the usefulness of such a process. Continuing violence and a lack of tangible results may erode public support for the peace process. The peace negotiation should also more actively integrate conflict-affected communities, particularly Afro-Colombians and indigenous people, whose voices so far have not been taken seriously.¹⁰

Even if a peace agreement between the guerrillas and the government is concluded, there are still many challenges to be met in building durable and positive peace in Colombia. The main challenge for the Colombian government will be to curb the hybrid politico-criminal violence related to the fragmentation of armed groups, both guerrilla and paramilitary, involved in the drugs trade, extortion, and assassinations. A successful negotiation might still fail to neutralise FARC fractions that are deeply involved in the drugs business and the occasional alliances with ex-paramilitaries and criminal gangs that

have emerged from the imperfect demobilisation of the main paramilitary group, AUC. Fragmentation of the FARC together with an incomplete demobilisation presents a bleak outlook in the construction of a less violent society.

Many experts, both international and national, claim that a combination of part of the guerrillas, new illegal armed groups and drug cartels have formed a sort of alliance against government law enforcement.¹¹ These types of low profile violent groups are more difficult to deal with than an organised guerrilla and they represent a significant concern for security in the region. These illegal armed groups operate in a similar way as other criminal groups in Central America and Mexico and could step into the void created by a demobilised guerrilla. Colombia risks a situation like that of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador: countries officially at peace but with one of the highest levels of violence in the world. This high level of violence is rooted in a history of civil wars and violence, rather similar to the Colombian history of violence. The peace negotiations that officially brought armed conflicts to an end in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have failed to effectively monitor the demobilisation of paramilitary and guerrilla groups that regenerated themselves into criminal gangs involved in drug trafficking, extortions and kidnapping.

To a large extent, the peace agreements in Central America have not improved the security situation of the marginalised part of the population, and in some places the situation is even worse than during the civil war. In hoping to offer a more peaceful future to their children, Colombia and its neighbours have much to learn from these former peace negotiations. Obviously, successful negotiations are not enough to bring peace and reconciliation in Colombia. The voices and concerns of those who have been most affected by the conflict need to be better integrated during and after the peace process, especially in the reconciliation process, as sustainable peace needs to be rooted in the bottom of the society. 🌿

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- 11 International Crisis Group (2012), "Colombia: peace at last?" <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/045-colombia-peace-at-last.aspx>



Families of the victims and community members attending the 10th anniversary of the massacre of Naya, in which at least 24 people were brutally killed by members of the paramilitary Calima Front.